



BAY AREA RESEARCH COLLECTIVE

This paper is an attempt to share some of our thoughts and feelings about the Symbionese Liberation Army. We are working from the basic position that all of us who are convinced of the necessity for a profound revolution in this country need to think seriously and carefully about the issue and the reality of armed struggle. From this position we support and respect the SLA's courage, audacity and commitment. Their ability to say, "We are no longer willing..." and to act with their whole lives upon their words has moved us deeply and affected our own lives. We feel that the SLA has "upped the revolutionary ante," so to speak, and there is much we can learn from analyzing their successes and mistakes. We hope that this brief contribution, which we've organized in chronological form, will help new dialogues and new seeds of commitment and hope to strengthen and grow.

The SLA first surfaced with the assassination of Marcus Foster, superintendent of the Oakland public school system. This action was a response to an LEAA* school ID program which elements of the Oakland community had been fighting for some time. Two weeks after Foster was killed the ID program was killed, later to be resurrected in a watered-down version.

The SLA acted from their analysis of the community's needs and mood. However the action took the community totally by surprise. In a communique explaining their action, issued shortly afterwards, the SLA condemned Foster and his sidekick Blackburn in general terms as members of the ruling class

*Law Enforcement Assistance Administration--a government organization which exists primarily to fund various new and/or experimental extensions of police power.

educational establishment, and in specific terms as implementers of the school program. In theoretical terms Foster was in fact a good target for people's opposition; the ID program was repressive and degrading and clearly opened the way for more repression in the name of "security." However, Foster's role in the program's formation was not generally visible, and he was not apparently generally regarded as a major enemy by those people in Oakland who had reason to know who he was. The result of his assassination, then, was two-sided: the ID program was stopped in its tracks, and the SLA began its history among the people in a somewhat alienated way. It appears to us, though, that Fahizah's later elaborations on the Foster action indicated that the SLA was sensitive to the possibility that their explanation should have been more thorough.

The next target of the SLA was better chosen, we feel, and therefore more successful; in fact, brilliantly so. Political kidnappings of the wealthy have long been readily accepted by many people in other parts of the world and by radicals in this country. Carrying out such a kidnapping here was a new idea, and it made dramatically visible in a new way the existence, causes and effects of the huge division between the American rich and poor. The subsequent food program re-emphasized the point, making into a concrete reality the well-known but often-ignored fact that one ruling-class person's bank account can feed thousands of hard-pressed people, just as one country's wealth can help to feed the world.

The food program was generally a mess, but what can we really expect of our enemies? People in Need, as the program was liberally named, was copied from a Washington model in which a supplemental food program was established for lower- and middle-class people who were thrown out of work when the

Boeing company ran into trouble. Hearst tried to score points for his magnanimity by ignoring the SLA's demands, and instead setting up an ongoing charity to distribute whatever foodstuffs Safeway couldn't sell. The idea of providing quality food was, of course, impractical and far too expensive to consider. As Tania herself said, the food being distributed was not what the Hearsts were used to eating. Clearly the Hearsts were not going to cooperate with a program which made the political point that hungry people could be fed in this country if our resources were more fairly distributed.

The reluctance and ambivalence of some parts of the radical community with respect to the food program seemed to have several causes. One of them was liberalism, manifested in an unwillingness to take guerillas as seriously when they appeared right in their own backyard as they can when they appear in Africa or Latin America. Other reasons were fear that overt support would cause police reprisals and genuine ideological splits with the SLA. The lack of unity in the left around the SLA cannot be easily defined or pinned down. We feel that it is symptomatic of the strength of the enemy and the lack of clarity on the part of those of us who wish to fight the struggle about how to go about it. We don't believe that it is symptomatic of the poverty of the SLA's politics as the straight media would have us believe. We are sorry that some "movement heavies" let themselves be used for the Hearst press's purposes.

Possibly the SLA's greatest coup in terms of propaganda was Patricia Hearst's joining the SLA and becoming Tania. A lot of people must have had a lot of new thoughts as they listened to her change and realized that the SLA was making much more sense than her family was. The courage with which

she acted on the conclusions she came to was beautiful. And it was a testament to the SLA's humanity that they obviously made a clear distinction between Tania, a young woman without much power in her family, and her parents. They treated her with care and respect, and gave her room and encouragement to grow. Their honorable treatment of her was in stark contrast to the shit-hole that two SLA soldiers were thrown into, a point which Tania made effectively.

The SLA's assault on the Hibernia bank was well-planned and well-executed. Its purpose was obvious. Unfortunately the reasons for the shootings of two bystanders has never been as obvious. We assume that the SLA took the shootings as seriously as we did, but their later explanations were not clear enough to dispel all of our uneasiness. Yet we remember that by this time the SLA was being ferociously and exhaustively hunted and was under a tremendous amount of pressure.

Some of the SLA's rhetoric seemed excessive to us. They made a call to arms for total revolutionary war where the proper situation simply did not exist. The federation they originally postulated sounded more and more like a dream as the months progressed, and they seemed to begin more and more to measure struggle strictly in terms of the use of weapons. When Teko criticized white men for being too chicken-shit to get down to armed struggle, he was laying a guilt-trip on us which can only succeed in creating added alienation and despair. Guns, bombs, molotovs and other weapons have always had a place in people's struggle against oppressive power. However, a weapon is not the revolutionary's only effective tool, especially in the most technologically advanced country in the world and the glorification of battle can quickly become a macho game. Guerillas fight in their own

way because they see an immediate need and useful purpose for their actions. They draw support insofar as their actions relate to the needs, desires and understanding of those they fight for and with. Their best propaganda is the integrity of their love and action.

The extremely military tone of the SLA's communiques led to two general feelings among us. One was a disappointment in the hollowness of their claims. There was, as far as we could tell, no large federation, no large army. The SLA was and is a tough effective guerilla unit. They apparently weren't and aren't a revolutionary army capable of overcoming the United States government. We didn't necessarily need them to be.

We also wonder whether the SLA had an awareness of the problems inherent in creating the spectacle of an extraordinary individual leader. The portrayal of Cinque to the community in several of the communiques was disconcerting and seemed to run counter to the lessons some of us have been learning from the women's movement and other sources. Offering people a strong leader to follow has serious limitations. If he (and it is generally men in these roles) dies, sells out, is incapacitated, or murdered, where does the movement go? In fact, the SLA's practice, both before and after Cinque's death, seemed more "collective" than their statements. We find strength in ourselves or we don't find it. To reproduce a strictly hierarchical structure is to copy part of what we want to abolish. We are sometimes led to believe that some of us, such as women, children, the old, and the disabled, are incapable of acting for themselves, and have to be fought for. History constantly exposes these prejudices as absurd.

We question in general how far the profound implications of the women's movement have penetrated the SLA's revolutionary theory and practice. We have learned that feminism is not a political idea which can be inserted neatly into a pre-women's-movement list of demands. It requires, instead, a thorough rethinking of all the traditional revolutionary forms. The SLA didn't ignore the lessons of feminism, but it didn't seem to make very full use of them, either. We feel, for instance, the lack of an adequate expression of the personal, emotional roots for the SLA's political commitment, especially from its women. When Cinque spoke of oppression, he spoke in the first-person of the destructive effects of the racism he had experienced. We did not hear a similar discussion from the women of the SLA about the effects of sexism. The relationships between oppressive forms of sexuality and fascism were ignored. There were lesbians in the SLA who could have chosen to speak about the political implications of their sexual choices, about the discrimination suffered by women who choose to live without men, and about their knowledge of the liberatory potential in overstepping the traditional social boundaries. Unfortunately, most people's only knowledge about them came by means of the sensationalistic crap offered up to us by the Hearst press.

The SLA isn't dead. There are members who survived the cold-blooded massacre in Compton, and who deserve our support and protection. Two of them, Russell Little and Joe Remiro, are currently being railroaded by a reactionary political circus in Sacramento. There are the murdered to remember, love, and feed our rage. And even if the SLA as such never does another action, the example of integrity they set for us, the lessons they provided for us to learn, the strong new thoughts and feelings that they nourished in us, in fact, all the material and spiritual effects of their existence will continue to echo.

The BAY AREA RESEARCH COLLECTIVE formed in the spring of 1974 largely as a response to the Symbionese Liberation Army and reactions to it by the police, the media both movement and straight, the left and the populace.

We try to give a voice to popular support and constructive criticism of clandestine groups and actions. We also try to build support by circulating information by and about these organizations.

Our general aim is the demystification/disalienation of "illegal" resistance and of the people who practice it.

We understand that mystification/alienation is also a very personal fact of daily life. We see it as essential to and inseparable from our political activity to try to break the barriers of personal and inter-personal alienation and mystification.

We need and welcome support, encouragement, analyses, opinion and money. We desire and will consider criticisms of our politics and practice.

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